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RUCNCLS/SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUEHZN/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0557

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1263

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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2144

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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC 0734

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC 0650

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC

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SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM SOCI KISL KIRF KPAO KZ

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: CHIEF MUFTI CRITICISES EXTREMISM, CAUTIOUSLY OPEN TO ENGLISH INSTRUCTION IN MADRASSAS

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: During a February 6 meeting, Chief Mufti and Head of the Spiritual Association of Muslims in Kazakhstan (SAMK) Absasttar Derbisali told the Ambassador that Islam is undergoing a renaissance in Kazakhstan. He shared his concern that religious extremism has tarnished the image of Islam, noting that Kazakhstan's educated populace is less susceptible to extremist ideas but admitting that Hizb-ut Tahrir (HT), a banned extremist organization, does function in Southern Kazakhstan. Derbisali lamented that "sects have flooded Kazakhstan" since independence. He underlined that education of imams is his first priority. The Ambassador presented our proposal to fund three English Language Fellows (ELF) TO teach English at Kazakhstan's madrassas. The Chief Mufti was cautiously open to the proposal, saying that he has to weigh carefully how English would fit into the students' already-crowded curriculum, but noted favorably that English education would allow Kazakhstani imams to participate in international conferences. END SUMMARY.

ISLAM'S LONG HISTORY IN CENTRAL ASIA

¶3. (SBU) On February 6, the Ambassador met in Almaty with Chief Mufti and Head of the Spiritual Association of Muslims in Kazakhstan (SAMK) Absattar Derbisali. Derbisali opened the meeting with a brief overview of the history of Islam in Central Asia, noting that Islam came to the region in the 8th century, well before the nomadic Central Asian tribes organized into separate and cohesive entities in the 15th century. He reminded the Ambassador that the practice of Islam was tightly controlled both by the Tsarist and Soviet authorities, and as a result, few Kazakhs had real knowledge of Islam at the time of Kazakhstan's independence. The religion has undergone a renaissance since then, with the number of mosques reaching 2,300 today. Derbisali underlined that his priority for SAMK is to focus on educating imams about the history and teachings of Islam, who in turn will educate the populace.

RELIGIOUS EXTREMISTS TARNISH ISLAM

¶4. (SBU) Derbisali shared his concern that religious extremists have tarnished the image of Islam, but noted that Kazakhstan differs from Muslim nations like Afghanistan and Pakistan "where people are

"illiterate" and are therefore "easily lead astray." Kazakhstan's SAMK "closely follows" President Nazarbayev's policy of "tolerance and unity above all else." Derbisali related that the majority of Kazakhs follow the Hanafi branch of Sunni Islam, although there are some adherents to Salafism. He admitted that Hizb-ut Tahrir (HT), the banned extremist organization, has a presence in Kentau in Southern Kazakhstan. He said he traveled there himself to meet with its followers and explain the error of their ways. "Religion should not mix with politics," stressed the Chief Mufti. The Ambassador expressed his agreement.

NON-TRADITIONAL FAITHS A THREAT

¶15. (SBU) Derbisali lamented that since independence, new religious groups or, as he put it, "sects and gurus," have "flooded" Kazakhstan. These missionaries have brought "dangerous" ideas with them, "clogging people's minds." (NOTE: Derbisali has publicly supported the draft law on religion, which would significantly limit the activities of smaller "non-traditional" religious groups. The draft is now before the Constitutional Council for review. END NOTE.)

CHIEF MUFTI PONDERS THE IDEA OF ENGLISH IN MADRASSAS

¶16. (SBU) The Chief Mufti underscored that his top priority as SAMK Chair is to improve the education of imams and to open more madrassas in Kazakhstan. He proudly highlighted that the Almaty Islamic Institute opened under his tenure, with the help of Egypt's Al-Azhar University. The Ambassador commended the Mufti's commitment to education and proposed providing three U.S.-funded English Language Fellows (ELFs) to teach English in Kazakhstan's madrassas. Derbisali welcomed the proposal, but said that he needs

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to think about it. His primary concern seemed to be how to fit English instruction into a crowded curriculum where students are already studying three languages -- Kazakh, Russian, and Arabic. He worried that students who come from rural areas and are struggling to learn Russian would be overloaded with yet another language. Despite these reservations, Derbisali noted that English education would allow Kazakhstan's imams to participate in international seminars and conferences. He stressed that he and his staff will seriously consider the proposal. After the meeting, Nurzhan Makhanov, the head of Chief Mufti's Protocol and External Relations Department, also floated the idea of having ELFs teach English for members of the SAMK Secretariat. The Ambassador told Makhanov that the program is flexible and can be molded to SAMK's needs.

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